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ABSTRACT

A study explored the nature of adult learners' social networks by interviewing six adult learners at a suburban northeast Ohio adult education site. Five of the subjects were working to pass the General Education Development Test and one was a student of English as a Second Language. The study found that several of the subjects had social networks that encouraged their participation in adult education, but several of the participants' networks were not supportive. All six subjects spoke about the support they felt from their current adult education teachers--especially compared to the elementary and secondary teachers they had had earlier. Friends were usually supportive of the learners' schooling efforts, but occasionally attempted to hinder the learners. One factor consistently emerged from the interviews as entirely supportive of literacy growth--the learners themselves. Without exception, the decision to participate in adult education was made independently. Specific occupational goals were also consistently named as supportive of literacy growth. Three ways that the findings could be used to help tutors, teachers, and program administrators work with adult learners were suggested: (1) since adult learners already function in interdependent social networks, it should be possible to build literacy networks through classes in reading and writing; (2) the social aspect of literacy could be legitimized through meaningful classroom interactions; and (3) the strong sense of ownership that adult learners bring to their literacy experiences suggests the appropriateness of a self-assessment component in literacy programs. (KC)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

Building on the Strengths of Social Networks

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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A common misconception about adult learners is that they are helpless, dependent individuals. Yet research shows adult literacy learners function as members of reciprocal social networks (Fingeret 1983, 1989). They develop and maintain interdependent relationships with others, offering their talents in exchange for help with reading and writing.

A recent study (Peck, 1993) investigated the nature of such social networks by interviewing several adult learners at a suburban northeast Ohio adult education site. These adult learners were willing to share their experiences "if it would somehow help other others like me" by promoting understanding of the adult literacy learning process.Of the six learners who were interviewed, five were working to pass the GED and one was an English as Second Language (ESL) student.

Through the interviews, the learners identified several factors that could either support or hinder their literacy growth: family, teachers, schooling, and friends.

Several had family members who encouraged them to take literacy classes and offered help with homework. Others felt they did not get the help they wanted. The ESL student was told by relatives not to go to school, but to get a job instead to earn some money.

All six informants spoke about the support they felt from their current adult education teachers.

One described her teacher as "interesting...she shows you and tells you...she doesn't rush you, either. She makes you feel comfortable and she lets you know about herself...." Another commented that his teacher showed support by affirming his ownership of his learning; she asked, "Where do you need your help?" Still another informant contrasted the support he felt from his adult education teacher with his earlier, traditional grade school teachers: "They just didn't care. They didn't care what I did, so I just sat there and did nothing."

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Schooling also emerged as both a support and a hindrance, depending on the particular features of the experience.

One learner compared the support he felt from the other students in his adult class with experiences he had in traditional schooling: "and being with people that are at the same level, and we're all adults, you don't get the aggravation like when you were kids in school and you make a mistake and everybody chuckles and, you know, that harassment you get. So it's a laid-back atmosphere where you can work at it...."

Friends were often supportive of literacy growth, sometimes encouraging the adult learner to do homework or even helping with it. Friends also showed support by asking questions about how the adult literacy classes were going. Occasionally, however, a friend hindered participation in literacy activities. When asked if anyone hindered her progress in reading and writing one learner replied, "Well for me, the only person was sort of my boyfriend. At first when I told him, he like didn't want me comin' here. He doesn't want me to better myself and do better than him." The ESL student said many people told her, "You don't have to go to school because you can learn from work, from the job."

One factor consistently emerged from these interviews as entirely supportive of literacy growth--the learners themselves.

Without exception, the decision to participate in adult literacy classes was made independently by the learner. One said, "I just made up my mind about coming to school...it took me a long time to really make up my mind to do it." When asked if anyone else was involved in making that decision she replied, "For me? No...totally my own." Another informant described her decision-making process this way, "...to come here...you have to do it yourself. I'm not doing it for anybody but me. You know, no one pushed me to come here. I decided. It took me time...three years to come back. But I did it on my own." For another informant, the decision to take classes was tentative. He reported that the first week the teacher asked if he'd like to participate in class or just watch. He chose to watch. At the end of the evening she asked, "Well, what do you think?" and he replied, "Well, you know, it's interesting and I think I can be a part of it and learn something from it." Even though the ESL student had relatives who told her she didn't need to take classes, she felt going to school was as important as her job. She said, "We work, but we have to go to school because otherwise we don't learn...I mean, if you don't go to school, how can you learn? This is my second job...."

Specific occupational goals were also consistently named as supportive of literacy growth. For several informants, a change in circumstances necessitated increased credentials in order to qualify for employment. For others, the goals directly connected to improved quality of living: "I just want to make more money...you know, I want to buy a house. I don't want to have to get married, then buy a house."

The strong ownership of the decision to participate in literacy classes and the specific occupational goals gives evidence of the independence of these adult learners.

When asked who helped him become a better reader and writer, one informant replied, "Myself...I'm workin' on things. Workin' on my school work, and workin' on my magazine." He pursued an interest in rock music and supported his reading and writing growth by networking through underground music magazines, trading demo tapes with groups around the country and in the UK, and interviewing band members through letter exchanges. When asked if he noticed changes in his reading and writing since working with the magazine, he replied, "Yeah. Bigger interviews. A lot longer...I've asked 'em more questions and I've gotten more in depth with their band...."

How might these findings help tutors, teachers, and program administrators in their work with adult learners?

Three possibilities are implicated. *First, adult learners already function in interdependent social networks.* Because they do, it should be possible to build literacy networks through classes in reading and writing. This means putting aside the view of adult learners as helpless, dependent individuals and recognizing instead the strengths they bring to the classroom, strengths such as the ability to make decisions, set goals, and widen their social networks to include those who support their literacy growth.

Second, the social aspect of literacy as clearly demonstrated through the dynamics of these networks could be embraced and legitimized through meaningful classroom interactions. This may be achieved through the sharing of personal stories, the connection of oral language to written, and the use of language for a variety of purposes, both formal and informal.

Third, the strong sense of ownership that adult learners bring to their literacy experiences suggests the appropriateness of a self-assessment component in literacy programs. Alternative measures of growth might attend to learner choice of content and personal goals. Adult learners who can so aptly articulate their needs within their social context should be given opportunities to do so within literacy programs as well.

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